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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF FAIR HARVARD'S BLACKS.

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THE "COLLEGE EXPERIENCE" OF 15 NEGRO MEN MATRICULATING AT HARVARD DURING 1963-64 WAS REPORTED. THE RESEARCHER INTERVIEWED THE MEN, ELICITING EXPRESSIONS OF WHAT IT MEANT, SOCIALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY, TO BE A NEGRO AT AN IVY LEAGUE COLLEGE. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN SUCH AREAS AS FAMILY BACKGROUND, SELF-CONCEPT, REFERENCE GROUPS, ASPIRATIONS, AND PERSONALITY WERE FOUND TO YIELD DIFFERING WAYS OF ORIENTATION IN THE CULTURE OF HARVARD COLLEGE. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM THE "HARVARD JOURNAL OF NEGRO AFFAIRS," VOLUME 1, NUMBER 2, 1965. (TC)

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Some Impressions of Fair Harvard's Blacks[1]

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FLORENCE SHELTON

In a previous paper[2] I attempted to characterize the social network of some of the Negro students who attended Harvard College in the late nineteen forties and early fifties, and to capture their reminiscences about the sweet and bitter aspects of their college experiences, many of which seemed very much influenced by their being Negro. Theirs was a small, motley brotherhood based primarily on skin color and perhaps on some aspects of a shared culture. Beyond that, they seemed to share little else in terms of intellectual interests and style of life. Had they been fellow-students at a Negro college, it is likely that most of them would not have known each other, so divergent were their lives. The common experience they shared through being the few blacks at Harvard in their time forged a strong bond that linked them even after their college years. Because of what they discovered at Harvard about themselves and about their relative positions in the social and economic structure of the United States, the inevitable theme of all their informal reunions was what they learned about being black while they were in college. On the occasions when I witnessed those reunions, I considered their conversations important accounts of their personal histories and commentaries on the social history of the "type" they

[1] I am indebted to Ulysses G. Shelton, Jr. '53 for an introduction to some of the experiences of Harvard men who are Negro. I also wish to thank Mary Belenky for her coding the data and suggesting interpretations which helped clarify some issues.

[2] Shelton, Florence C. "Conversations with Some Harvard Blacks." Unpublished manuscript, 1962.

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represented, the Ivy League Negro.[3] Their accounts of what Harvard was like for them a decade or so ago raised some questions about what the Negro students there recently and presently are learning about themselves with respect to race.

During the past decade, there have been a number of national and international developments which have had personal significance for most Negroes in America. The impact of those events has been felt most profoundly by the current generation of college students, black and white. One suspects that the experiences of Negro College Students in many quarters today are quite different from those of Negro students of a decade or more ago. Regrettably, comparable accounts are rarely available and comparisons with regard to race-related experiences probably would not be very meaningful anyway, since there have been changes influencing the position and presence of Negroes in American colleges and universities. In the Ivy League colleges, as well as in other colleges outside of the South, there has been a marked increase in the number of Negro students now in attendance. Furthermore, the appearance of Negroes in faculty and administrative positions has provided students with evidence of the possibility of academic careers for Negroes in outstanding colleges and universities.

In undertaking this study, it was my hope to elicit expressions of what it meant socially and psychologically to be a Negro at Harvard College from students matriculating there during 1963-64. From the viewpoint of the social history of the College, it seems important to document some aspects of their experiences. Their non-Negro fellow students perhaps from time to time wonder about the nature of the college experience when felt beneath a darker skin. The faculty and administration of Harvard College and of other colleges are displaying a growing interest in contributing more effectively to the self-realization of students with marginal positions and minority group status in their college communities and in society in general. Other Negro students in college situations comparable to the situations Harvard presents are interested in knowing about the view from Harvard Square. Finally, students

[3] For recent autobiographical accounts by Negroes who attended Ivy League Colleges, see W. M. Kelley, "The Ivy League Negro", *Esquire Magazine*, August, 1963; and M. W. Davis "A View from Further South in the Ivy League: A Negro Goes to Yale", *Esquire Magazine*, April, 1964, (reprinted, *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1.)

attending colleges quite different from the Ivy League schools are somewhat curious about what they might be gaining or missing by virtue of their circumstances. To these readers, this paper attempts to bring some fragments of the personal experiences of a few Negro Americans attending Harvard College, highlighting the racial dimensions of their experiences.

Of the fifteen young men invited[4] to participate in the study, seven are members of the class of '66, four represent the class of '65, and three the class of '64. Only one member of the class of '67 was interviewed. It was my feeling that the impressions of freshmen were of limited value to the study.

In several respects the group was probably indistinguishable from many of their college contemporaries. They were concentrating in government, social relations, history, English, mathematics, engineering, biology and philosophy. Their extra-curricular activities included participation in varsity football, lacrosse, and track, as well as an assortment of intra-mural sports as players or managers. One was affiliated with *The Harvard Crimson*, another with Harvard's radio station. Among them were Young Republicans, Young Democrats, and a member of the Young Socialist Club; members of the Wesley Foundation, Harvard Christian Fellowship, Hillel, and the Newman Club. Some were hospital volunteers. One was associated with the Chess Club and one with the Camera Club. Two had been elected to their house committees; another also ran but had lost. Some were involved in activities of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and the Northern Student Movement. A

[4] First students who were active members of AAAAS were interviewed. After the interview each was asked to identify other students characterized by these descriptions: (a) those who are highly unlikely to become affiliated with AAAAS and have no connections with civil rights groups; (b) those who are not active members of AAAAS and/or civil rights groups but sometimes attend meetings or participate in their activities. The first description consistently elicited the same names. Those students were interviewed. Those mentioned most frequently in response to the second description were sought for interview purposes, also. Consequently, the opinions and experiences reported here are those of students who might be regarded as "types". The procedure for selection of subjects was not intended to yield a representative sample.

Questions other than those mentioned in the text were asked during the interview. A copy of the interview schedule is available upon request. The author interviewed all subjects. She was not affiliated with Harvard University at the time.

A few interviews with black Africans who were students at Harvard made it evident that their experiences were not comparable to those of black Americans. For this reason the former were not included in the study.

few listed ROTC among their activities. A few added that they worked in dining halls or one of the University's libraries. A few others had occasional jobs.

Participation in some other activities, however, makes this group racially distinguishable. Some were affiliated with the Association of African and Afro-American Students which then was becoming established at Harvard. Two said they were affiliated with the all-black Boston Action Group. A few were members of a Negro fraternity.

Nearly half of the students in this group were southern-born. The rest were born in border states, in the mid-West and North West. Many of them had grown up in the places where they were born although almost half had been transplanted from southern and border state communities to mid-Western and West Coast cities and towns. For the most part, they had attended public schools. Three, however, had prepared for Harvard at eminent New England preparatory schools. These three are sons of men employed in professional or semi-professional occupations—a lawyer, an elementary school principal, and a career U.S. government employee. The rest, those educated in public schools, gave as their father's occupations the following: university professor, tavern operator, engineer, public accountant, and tailor. Three worked as truck drivers, two as physicians, and two as semi-skilled laborers. Their own occupational aspirations are in these areas: law (the choice of five of the students), teaching, diplomatic service, medicine, the ministry, engineering, and social science. Two are preparing for careers in social change organizations, one in the Peace Corps, and the other in a civil rights organization. None was making the occupational choice his father had made.

Since they had considered other colleges and other colleges had considered them, each student was asked why he had chosen Harvard and then was asked why Harvard had chosen him. Their reasons were straight-forward. Most frequently, as one might expect, they mentioned Harvard's tradition of academic excellence, the challenge it presented, and the glory it promised. One seemed keenly aware of the prestige-value of being a Harvard man. The scholarship aid and other forms of financial assistance offered by Harvard influenced the choice of some. One student said that he was pleased that Harvard had not offered him an athletic scholarship as some other colleges had. He acknowledged an outstanding athletic record

in high school, but it was important to him to enter college on academic terms. He wanted to feel that he was being supported for his scholastic merit rather than for his athletic abilities. Other factors which influenced the selection of some were being near Boston and near colleges with women students. One student chose Harvard because it meant being a long way from his hometown while another made the choice to be near his.

For some the decision to come to Harvard was an easy one. A student with an impressive preparatory school record said he had applied to Harvard and Yale only and that Harvard was his first choice. For others the decision required much deliberation. During the period of decision-making it sometimes was the insistence and the encouragement of interested relatives, teachers or friends that influenced the choice. One student was considering a small New England college. Another initially had decided upon a predominantly Negro college in part because many of his friends would be in attendance there. A recruiting Harvard alumnus, however, turned this student's sights toward Cambridge. Of those interviewed, four had been recruited by individuals or organizations assisting Harvard in its effort to include more Negroes in the College.

Their responses to the question, "Why do you think Harvard chose you?" required considerably more self-evaluative reflection than their fluent listing of factors which determined their own choices. This question elicited from some explanations that revealed a kind of self-abasement or, more euphemistically, modesty, which I judged to be influenced more by their personal perspective than by objective evidence. Others semed proud of their scholastic achievements and personal attributes and were confident that in choosing them Harvard had chosen wisely and well. The latter noted that their grades were very good or outstanding, that they had performed well on the College Boards, that they had excellent recommendations from former teachers, that they were well-rounded students with records which showed successful participation in several areas of school life, and that they seemed highly motivated to undertake academic projects independently. These things, they felt, qualified them for the privilege of becoming Harvard men. Those who seemed modest or even self-abasing attributed their selection primarily to external circumstances rather than personal qualifications. For example, three mentioned their geographic origin as a critical determining factor in their selection. Several, even

some who had expressed a relatively high degree of self-confidence or self-esteem, felt the fact they were Negro had positively influenced their selection. It was expressed usually as one of several factors which contributed to the student's individuality. In the opinion of some, being Negro also served to help the college meet its diversity criteria. A few thought race *per se* was of critical significance with regard to their selection. "I like to think it's because I was one of the qualified applicants but I guess they were trying to get some Negro students" was one such explanation.

One wonders about the social and psychological experiences of a student who feels that the standards which most of the other students had to meet were not applied to him and perhaps to a few more like him.[5] He feels instead that because of present social and educational conditions it was expedient for this college (and some others) to make available to him a princely education that otherwise might have been out of reach. Just now his race makes him a needed commodity—he comes in an attractively wrapped package. What if the times, the circumstances had been different? Does this question evoke in him dreams of more satisfying experiences of what college might have been had he gone elsewhere? Or does it evoke a nightmarish sequence of very unsatisfactory college experiences hardly comparable to all to the intellectual and personal pleasures he has found in his life at Cambridge? More important, how does what he views as his second-class studentship influence his own feelings of personal worth and the manner in which he presents himself to others? How does it modify his academic expectations and his future aspirations and performance? Do the advantages of an excellent education perceived in these terms outweigh the disadvantages? If this view represents a misperception on the part of some students, how might those students be detected and their misperceptions corrected by interested and responsible persons in the college? I have stated that only a few felt that their race was a critical factor in their selection. They are, in many ways, a precious few. If they deserved the opportunity, they also deserve the attention needed to help them maximize the opportunity and what it might offer.

[5] Included in this group are non-Negro students who feel their being selected depended upon factors other than scholastic performance, College Board scores or other evidence of academic potential. The relationship between students' explanations of their being accepted by a college and their performance in college should be explored.

And how might the college provide that special attention without accentuating their feeling that they are special cases? Or worse, without appearing to be condescending or—God forbid—paternalistic? Such is the dilemma of the college.[6] Most abhorrent to this group of students was the occasional feeling that they were once more victims of paternalism, children of another Great White Father—sometimes in the role of dean, instructor, tutor, and most painful of all, classmate and peer. Associated with it was their distrust and disdain for the attitudes which they referred to as white liberalism. Their statements expressed the constant wariness that some feel whenever they enter a situation in the college context which includes an untested white person with whom they must interact. (How frequent such encounters must be!) A poignant example of such vigilance was offered by a student who said "I'm always on the lookout for the so-called liberal—someone stretching *down* a helping hand." He added that the "someone" usually is a fellow-student. Other students—four or five in all—indicated their resentment of relationships which were marked by patronizing or condescending acts or signs of excessive interest or concern.

They were annoyed by those whom they describe as bending over backwards to please them, to help them or to assure them of their good intentions. To one who participated in intramural baseball it meant that he sometimes was given what he regarded as an unfair advantage. He felt he was a mediocre player. He said that his teammates, however, "always assumed I was good enough to start when I played." He could not decide whether they were being "nice" to him because he is Negro or whether they expected him to perform well on the playing field because he is Negro.

There were fewer references to perceptions of paternalism or white liberalism on the part of faculty members, deans and other administrative personnel. But contacts with them are less frequent. Besides, such claims would need thorough exploration since the roles themselves embody some behavior which even more objectively might be characterized as paternalistic. As we shall see below, an act or attitude which may be dismissed as paternalistic if

[6] This is not solely Harvard's dilemma. At the moment this is a concern of a number of institutions which have sought students whose possibilities for success might be enhanced by assistance extended in a manner that does not embarrass or offend the student.

expressed by a peer, is entirely appropriate and acceptable when a faculty member or administrator is the source.

Direct inquiry was made about differential treatment which was felt to be race-related. The students were asked to discuss both positive and negative instances of discrimination, that is, discrimination toward them and against them. One student reported that he was not aware of differential treatment of any kind. The rest were able to recall instances of differential treatment—a few citing only positive instances, a few recalling only negative ones. The others, nearly half the group, related some episodes which gave evidence of discrimination in their favor as well as episodes involving discrimination against them. Reported instances of positive or favorable discrimination occurred in contacts with faculty members and administrative personnel only. For example, one student attributes his receiving additional financial assistance to his being Negro. Another said he was admitted to one seminar because of his race. One student stated that, when talking with some instructors, he sensed that they made a special effort to establish rapport; he felt they made the effort because he was Negro.

Aside from several references to an ROTC instructor who seemed to display consistently anti-Negro sentiments, accounts of negative discrimination involved other students only. Most of the incidents were related to their participation in social activities. Some statements about the nature of the discrimination revealed the complexity of the situation. A student from a blue-collar background presented this view: "Socially I'm discriminated against. I'm just not in. I'm just not part of the white world. A white guy from a working class background must feel more in. Lots of them study a lot . . . they don't seem to make friends . . . don't become part of a larger group. They, too, might be discriminated against in social things." An observation from another angle was offered by a prep school graduate for whom the most salient form of discrimination is his exclusion from the group of young Harvard men present at social gatherings of "people in the social register, wealthy New England aristocrats." He described their "polite brush-off." He mentioned exclusion from final clubs on racial grounds as another example of the kind of discrimination that is important to him. Still another variety of discrimination was alluded to by a student from a Southern working class family. He asserted that "some Negroes here seem to have lost their identity . . . they act as if they want to

be a part of the other race. They don't associate, they don't speak." He added that they had resisted his attempts to become acquainted and had rejected the overtures of others as well.

With respect to their social orientation, racially-speaking, these students seem to fall into three fairly distinct groups. This is not at all surprising in view of the selection of students who were interviewed. (See footnote 4.) There are two students whose social contacts are with white students almost exclusively. One stated that he is "more comfortable in the white world." A review of their educational histories suggests a plausible explanation for their orientation. Both had attended preparatory schools and probably had maintained contacts with other students from their respective schools. It is also likely that they are more familiar with the forms for initiating relationships with others of similar scholastic backgrounds, a condition which markedly reduces the number of students, white and Negro, whom they are likely to regard as socially accessible. In their cases, social class seems to be a prime factor influencing their friendships and acquaintances.

Another group of students described a rather varied social life with respect to race and social class. They described most of the collegiate parties they attend as "racially mixed;" however, each reported that occasionally he is the sole Negro at a party and occasionally also attends all-Negro gatherings. There is no evidence that the racial composition of the group differentially influences their satisfaction with the occasions.

The orientation of the majority of those interviewed is toward a predominantly black social world. A few implied that they have made a conscious effort to include a number of other Negroes at Harvard among their friends and consciously, too, they have discouraged or have been indifferent to "invitations to become acquainted" extended by whites. For example, after his freshman year, one student began to feel that he wanted to be in the company of other Negro students more often. He arranged to spend more and more time with them by refusing invitations from friends he had made in his preparatory school. For others it rarely required deliberate strategy, at least not on their part. According to one student, an athlete, the parties he attends usually are all-black. He said that only the "very liberal whites" had invited him; he had never been invited to a party by a "jock" or a "WASP." For this group, a Negro fraternity with an undergraduate chapter in Boston was one

entree into local Negro social activities. A few had independently established contacts with other young people in Negro communities in the Boston area.

Parties were mentioned most frequently as entertaining occasions. Other entertainment interests included motion pictures, theater, football games, card playing, dinner dates, and live performances of jazz and classical music. (It is impossible to estimate the frequency of participation in such activities on the basis of the data available.) One student made a point of saying that he is definitely against going to a play or opera since it is a "sign of accepting the white man's values." He said that he was not reared in a culture in which you take a girl to see a play.

A number of different attitudes were expressed when the racial aspect of their dating was discussed. For the most part, their dates were with girls attending colleges in the Boston area.

One student expressed his skepticism about the motives of the white girls he dates. For him a date with a white girl often presents some "distressing" moments when he finds himself asking, "Are you sincerely interested in me? Are you so ineffectual that you can only feel secure with me? Or are you just trying to be nice?"

A less self-conscious reply from another student began with his saying, "I date whom I please. I like pretty girls, interesting girls." He stated further that he does not consider dating along racial lines unless he is "out to prove something." A few students simply stated that they date white girls more frequently than they date Negro girls. One explained that he does not attend social gatherings where he would have opportunities to meet Negro girls. Another, who estimated that he dates about twice as many white girls as Negro girls, added that his parents disapprove of interracial dating. He expects to marry a Negro girl. Availability is a factor which influences his current dating pattern or in his words, "It's easier to date a white girl than a Negro girl at Radcliffe. There's more competition for the Negro girls."

Those who reported dating Negro girls exclusively or more frequently sometimes had arrived at the decision "to date black" after what must have been agonizing hours of social analysis and self-examination. A few talked about it as if it were a kind of conversion. During their freshman years they had dated white girls most of the time but then an incident or insight changed the course of their dating. Others presented it as if they consciously had formu-

lated a statement of policy. A student from Tennessee who decided to date "mostly black" offered his reasons for it in this way: "I feel I can't separate my present life from my future. Blacks are the people I have to live among and whites are those whose attitudes I want to change. . . . Dating a white girl is like an excursion. It's not a relationship I would try to sustain." He had stated explicitly what the expressions of others had implied: The racial pattern of their dating in particular and of their relationships with other students in general is determined to a considerable extent by where they are from and where they expect to go, socio-economically as well as geographically.

Interracial dating as well as other relationships involving white students heightened an awareness of what some called their "negritude." A sophomore remarked that he felt he was enveloped in an atmosphere which compelled him to accentuate his "soul qualities." He found himself insisting that he preferred "soul music" and "soul food" although he rarely found them really pleasurable. It was as if he felt he was in a cathedral to high WASP culture . . . fair Harvard . . . and from time to time he had an uncontrollable urge to do or say something that would seem terribly blasphemous. His own interpretation of it was that he wanted to show that he is not ashamed of some traditions associated with Negro Americans. It might also be taken as a sign of his coming to terms with some aspects of his being Negro, at least in his present setting.

Struggles with the recognition of racial identity and the acceptance or rejection of a Negro identity were reflected in many of the students' statements. In response to a question about how he had changed since coming to Harvard one student asserted, "I've become more Negro." He said that he was not aware of cultural differences before coming to Harvard, an observation he shared with others from the South where their contacts with members of other ethnic and racial groups were limited. What he had discovered were some customs and mores unique to his sub-culture. Aware of his racially ambiguous physiognomy, another student said that now he does not like being mistaken for "something else," that is, he has come to want to be recognized as Negro. One of the students from the South wondered if he was "missing a feeling of identity with the Negro" by having infrequent contacts with Negroes outside the College and finding many of the Negroes he met at Harvard an un-

familiar breed. He wondered if he perhaps should have gone to an all-Negro college.

In the opinion of another student, the personal decisions that one must make about the "relevance of his negritude to his way of life" are of utmost importance to the future lives of Negroes now at Harvard. His being Negro seemed central to what he described as his "current identity crisis".[7] There was one student who felt "no need to come to terms with a racial identity." He commented, "I've been telling myself the important concern is to be an individual, a personality, a human being." He said that he avoids people who approach him "in a limited way—too narrow for my identity." He also stated that he avoids relationships "predicated on blackness." "It allows you to filter yourself through only one lens," he declared. These responses suggest the extent of variability of the reactions to racial identity as a personal issue.

Student life at Harvard College, it seems, affords many opportunities for diverse experiences which bring into focus different facets of oneself such as one's racial identity. Under such circumstances varied resolutions of the problems presented might be expected.

A final question intended to elicit an over-all evaluation of their days at Harvard was posed in these terms: "Would you send a son of yours to Harvard?"[8] Each answered "yes"; and their saying yes said also that they were satisfied generally with their lives at Harvard. The reasons given for their affirmative responses to the question pertained to the quality of the education offered, which perhaps is what they value most about their experience. The advantages of such an education are thought to off-set the disadvantageous aspects of this collegiate venture.

One can only speculate about what the lives of these Harvard men will be like when their sons are of college age. Indeed, what

[7] A number of the students spoke of experiencing an "identity crisis" in a way which indicated that the concept had become a part of the undergraduate vernacular.

[8] Only two said that they would want daughters of theirs to attend Radcliffe. Those who were opposed to the idea indicated that they disapprove of intellectual competitiveness in women and of other signs of "defeminization" they feel Radcliffe students display. One student explained that he objected because the position of the Negro female in an integrated college is very different from that of a male. "A fellow has a chance to go out and seek things. A girl has to wait. It would make dating difficult for her."

will their lives be like a decade from now? It is suggested that those who associate mainly with other Negro students attending the College do so because they share similar backgrounds, similar interests and similar goals. It seems likely that they will maintain some of these relationships after their college years. Others have indicated clearly that their friendships and affiliations are only slightly or perhaps not at all determined by their racial backgrounds. A choice of this nature is available to them at Harvard. The circumstances prevailing ten or fifteen years ago which contributed to the formation of a self-conscious clique of blacks no longer exist at Harvard. The change can be attributed in part to the increase in the number of Negro students attending the College in recent years. It has meant including a more diverse group of Negroes in the College population, too. Other aspects of the current social revolution are continually changing the status and situation of Negroes at Harvard. It was pointed out that the situations and statements related in this presentation characterize the Harvard experienced by those who were students in 1963-64. It may not seem valid to the members of the Class of '69 because there have been many important changes since then.

It is regrettable that the scope of this inquiry did not permit a more intensive exploration of the movement related to social change, particularly the civil rights movement. The nature and extent of the students' participation in this movement would be of considerable interest.[9] Their varied reactions to the organization of AAAAS were inventoried; however, it seems more appropriate to report them in another context. Frequent references to the freedom they have found at Harvard, both academic and personal, are not included in this account. Harvard freedom is widely recognized; but does this freedom have deeper, more personal significance for those who feel their freedom is limited in some quarters? This, too, might have been investigated.

Ideally, the total population or at least a probability sample of a sizable number of the Negroes attending the College might be surveyed for the purpose of establishing a basis for some definitive statements about this group of students and providing information which might influence college policies with consequences particular-

[9] Opinions about involvement in civil rights activities which were expressed by some of the Negro students at Columbia College appeared in "Six Undergraduates Speak Out", *Columbia College Today*, 1964, 12, 32-33.

NAA

ly relevant to them. An examination of the relationships among demographic variables, indices of academic potential and performance and students' attitudes toward aspects of their college experiences seems warranted. A comparison with white students at Harvard of similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds would reveal some of the differences related partially or entirely to race. One might consider an Ivy League-wide study of this type. Recruitment programs are bringing more Negro students to these and other colleges, however, the current emphasis on research projects involving the disadvantaged dictates a low research priority for Negroes attending Ivy League schools. Still, an exploration of several dimensions of their experiences and their prospects seems in order.

This report attempts to convey some impressions of only a small group of students. It is my hope, however, that these impressions have revealed some aspects of the college situations of some Negro Harvard men whose experiences may have gone unrecorded or even unrecognized.

JUL 17 1967